



SOCIOLOGY 208 CONTEMPORARY THEORY AND RESEARCH

Fall 2011
Wednesday 10-12, WJH 601

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Course Overview

Sociology 208 has four principal goals:

- 1) to convey a general understanding of how sociology developed as a discipline within the milieu of 20th-century America and to trace the development of the main theoretical traditions in American sociology
- 2) to consider the role of mechanisms in sociological theorizing
- 3) to examine cultural and structural explanations of empirical phenomena
- 4) to give students more experience in analyzing how sociological theory is employed in empirical research.

American sociology is distinct in having evolved in the 20th century as a highly empirical social science, often in the service of trying to find solutions to contemporary social problems. As 21st-century sociologists we now find ourselves in the situation of not sharing one dominant, overarching paradigm, nor do we necessarily agree on an accompanying set of shared assumptions about the determinants of human action or the most fruitful units of analysis. Sociological research and journals—as well as the structure of the discipline’s main professional association in the U.S., the American Sociological Association—tend to be organized by substantive area (e.g. inequality, crime, collective action, organizations, education, labor markets, culture, economic sociology, gender, historical sociology, urban sociology, etc.). It is often the case that a variety of theoretical approaches co-exist, happily or not, within a given substantive area and often cut across substantive areas as well. Moreover, the boundaries between theory and method within the sociological discipline in the U.S. have become increasingly blurred. Some sociologists view this as an unproblematic development while others regard it with some distress.

We begin the semester with the question of how a theory “works”, especially with regard to how a theory specifies or implies the *mechanisms* that lead to human action and how sociologists choose to conceptualize the “sociological actor”. We then turn in the second part of the course to an overview of the path that American sociology followed in the 20th century. Here we consider the key roles played by several departments (Chicago, Harvard, Columbia) in defining the central questions of the discipline and in championing particular types of sociological theory to address them. In the third part of the course we look more carefully at the contrasts and

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complementarities between theoretical perspectives that privilege structure and those that privilege culture. In doing so, we move to the third purposes of the course: analyzing how contemporary sociologists employ sociological theory in their empirical work.

Course Requirements

You are expected to carefully read the assigned texts before we meet in class and to participate actively in class discussions. You should come to class having identified the main questions that scholars are raising, the assertions they are making, and any underlying assumptions you can discern in their arguments. As in Sociology 204, you are required to submit a 1-2 page précis of the readings each week. This should be posted in the course dropbox at least 24 hours in advance of the weekly class meeting.

You will have two longer writing assignments. The first will be a review and analysis (“synthesis paper”) of a group of theoretically-related articles (in one of weeks 9-13 in the course). The second will be a longer paper in which you apply theoretical concepts or hypotheses to an area of interest to you; I will refer to this as the “theoretical application” paper. You will write two drafts of this latter paper—one for the purposes of presentation and critique by a classmate, and a revision that incorporates the feedback from this critique and that of the instructor. The final version of the theoretical application paper will be due on December 9.

Grading

Your course grade will be determined as follows:

Class participation	20%
Weekly précis of readings	20%
Synthesis paper	20%
Critique	10%
Theoretical application	30%

Readings

All readings listed on the syllabus are required. They are available on the course website: <http://isites.harvard.edu/k64382>.

SEMESTER SCHEDULE

PART I. SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY AND SOCIAL MECHANISMS

Week I(September 7) Introduction

NOTE: Graduate courses that meet only on Wednesdays do not officially begin until September 7. Please read and be prepared to discuss the following for our class meeting on that day:

Stanley Lieberson and Freda B. Lynn. 2002. “Barking Up the Wrong Branch.” Annual Review of Sociology 28: 1-19.

Robert K. Merton. 1967. “On Sociological Theories of the Middle Range.” Pp.39-72 in Robert K Merton, On Theoretical Sociology. New York: Free Press.

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Peter Hedström and Lars Udehn. 2009. "Analytical Sociology and Theories of the Middle Range." Chapter 2 in Peter Hedström and Peter Bearman, eds., The Oxford Handbook of Analytical Sociology. New York: Oxford University Press.

[Read if you are interested: Gabrielle Ferrales and Gary Alan Fine. 2005. "Sociology as a Vocation: Reputations and Group Cultures in Graduate School." The American Sociologist 5: 57-75.]

Week 2 (September 14) Social Mechanisms, Micro-Macro Linkages

James S. Coleman. 1990. Foundations of Social Theory, Chapter 1. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Peter Hedström and Richard Swedberg. 1998. "Social Mechanisms: An Introductory Essay." Pp. 1-31 in Social Mechanisms, edited by Peter Hedström and Richard Swedberg. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gudmund Hernes. 1998. "Real Virtuality." Pp. 74-101 in Social Mechanisms, edited by Hedström and Swedberg.

Aage Sorensen. 1998. "Theoretical Mechanisms and the Empirical Study of Social Processes." Pp. 238-266 in Social Mechanisms, edited by Hedström and Swedberg.

Week 3 (September 21) What is a Sociological "Actor"? Assumptions in Sociological Theorizing

James S. Coleman. 1990. Foundations of Social Theory, Chapter 2. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Dennis H. Wrong. 1961. "The Oversocialized Conception of Man in Modern Sociology." American Sociological Review 183-193.

Michael Hechter. 1987. Pp. 15-30 in Principles of Group Solidarity. Berkeley: University of California Press.

John W. Meyer and Ronald L. Jepperson. 2000. "The 'Actors' of Modern Society: The Cultural Construction of Social Agency." Sociological Theory 18: 100-120.

John Meyer and Ronald Jepperson. 2007. "Analytical Individualism and the Explanation of Macrosocial Change." In Victor Nee and Richard Swedberg, eds., On Capitalism. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

PART II. SOCIOLOGY IN AMERICA: A BRIEF HISTORICAL TOUR

Week 4 (September 28) American Sociology from the Late 19th Century through the Rise of the "Chicago School"

George Ritzer. 2008. "A Historical Sketch of Sociological Theory: The Later Years." Pp. 51-87 in George Ritzer, Modern Sociological Theory. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Eli Zaretsky. 1996. "Introduction" and "Epilogue" to The Polish Peasant in Europe and America, by William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki.

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William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki. 1996. The Polish Peasant in Europe and America, edited by Eli Zaretsky, Introduction to Parts 3 and 4. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Herbert Blumer. 1969. "Society as Symbolic Interaction." Pp. 78-89 in Herbert Blumer, Symbolic Interaction. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Andrew Abbott. 1997. "Of Time and Space: The Contemporary Relevance of the Chicago School." Social Forces 75: 1149-1182. (Read pp. 1149-1165)

Robert J. Sampson, Jeffrey D. Morenoff, and Felton Earls. 1999. "Beyond Social Capital: Spatial Dynamics of Collective Efficacy for Children." American Sociological Review 64: 633-660.

Weeks 5 and 6 (October 5, 12) Harvard: Parsons vs. Homans

October 5: Parsons and Structural Functionalism

George Ritzer. 2008. "Structural Functionalism, Neofunctionalism, and Conflict Theory." Pp. 97-113 in Ritzer, Modern Sociological Theory. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Arthur Stinchcombe. 1968. Constructing Social Theories, p. 80-101. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Talcott Parsons. 1951. "The Functional Prerequisites of Social Systems." Pp. 24-45 in The Social System. New York: The Free Press.

Talcott Parsons. 1959. "The School Class as a Social System: Some of Its Functions in American Society." Harvard Educational Review 29: 297-318.

Robert K. Merton. 1938. "Social Structure and Anomie." American Sociological Review 3: 672-682.

Robert K. Merton. 1968. "Manifest and latent Functions." In Merton, Social Theory and Social Structure. New York: Free Press.

Kingsley Davis and Wilbert E. Moore. 1945. "Some Principles of Stratification." American Sociological Review 10: 242-249.

October 12: Homans and Beyond—Individual Actions and Social Exchange

George Caspar Homans. 1958. "Social Behaviour as Exchange." American Journal of Sociology 63: 579-606.

George Caspar Homans. 1965. "Bringing Men Back In." American Sociological Review 29: 807-828.

Richard M. Emerson. 1962. "Power-Dependence Relations." American Sociological Review 27:31-41.

Karen S. Cook and Richard M. Emerson. 1978. "Power, Equity and Commitment in Exchange Networks." American Sociological Review 43: 721-739.

Peter Kollock. 1994. "The Emergence of Exchange Structures: An Experimental Study of Uncertainty, Commitment, and Trust." American Journal of Sociology 100: 313-345.

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Week 7 (October 19) The Columbia School and Its Legacy: Merton, Coleman, and Rational Choice Theory

Stephen Park Turner and Jonathan H. Turner. 1990. Pp. 85-118 in The Impossible Science: An Institutional Analysis of American Sociology. Newbury Park: Sage Publications.

Richard Breen. 2009. "Formal Theory in the Social Sciences." Pp. 209-228 in Peter Hedström and Bjorn Wittroc, eds., Frontiers of Sociology. Leiden: Brill.

James S. Coleman. 1996. "A Vision for Sociology." Pp. 343-349 in Jon Clark, editor, James S. Coleman. London: Falmer Press.

Michael Hechter. 1987. Pp. 30-39 in Principles of Group Solidarity. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Robert K. Merton. 1996. "Teaching James Coleman." Pp. 351-356 in Jon Clark, editor, James S. Coleman. London: Falmer Press.

Robert K. Merton. 1968. "Matthew Effect in Science." Science 159: 56-63.

Thomas A. DiPrete and Gregory M. Eirich. 2006. "Cumulative Advantage as a Mechanism for Inequality: A Review of Theoretical and Empirical Developments." Annual Review of Sociology 32; pp. 271-274, middle of p. 279-293.

Ronald Burt. 1987. "Social Contagion and Innovation: Cohesion vs. Structural Equivalence." American Journal of Sociology 92: 1287-1335. Read pp. 1287-1294, 1297-1310, 1326-1328.

Week 8 (October 26) Market Processes and Social Influences

Joel Podolny and Freda Lynn. 2009. "Status." In Peter Hedström and Peter Bearman, eds., The Oxford Handbook of Analytical Sociology. New York: Oxford University Press.

B.A. Benjamin and Joel M. Podolny. 1999. "Status, Quality, and Social Order in the California Wine Industry." Administrative Science Quarterly 44: 563-89.

D. J. Phillips. 2001. "The Promotion Paradox: Organizational Mortality and Employee Promotion Chances in Silicon Valley Firms, 1946-1996." American Journal of Sociology 106: 1058-98.

Matthew J. Salganik, P.S. Dodds, and Duncan J. Watts. 2006. "Experimental Study of Inequality and Unpredictability in an Artificial Cultural Market." Science 311: 854-6.

Ka-Yuet Liu, Marissa King, and Peter S. Bearman 2010. "Social Influence and the Autism Epidemic." American Journal of Sociology 115: 1387-1434.

Week 9 (November 2) Discussion of Theoretical Application Paper Drafts

→ **First draft of research proposal due in course dropbox by 6 PM Sunday, October 30; Brinton to randomly assign a discussant for each paper**

**In class: Summary and critique of first drafts of theoretical application papers
(Class format: Discussants to be randomly assigned; each summary and critique=10 mins.)**

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PART III. STRUCTURE, CULTURE, AND IDENTITY

Week 10 (November 9) Gender: Structure, Culture, and Ascription

Francine D. Blau, Mary C. Brinton, and David Grusky. 2006. The Declining Significance of Gender? Chapter 1. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Barbara Reskin. 2003. "Including Mechanisms in Our Models of Ascriptive Inequality." American Sociological Review 68: 1-21.

Rosabeth Moss Kanter. 1993. Men and Women of the Corporation, Chapter 8. New York: Basic Books.

Julie Brines. 1994. "Economic Dependency, Gender, and the Division of Labor at Home." American Journal of Sociology 100: 652-688.

Sanjiv Gupta. 1999. "The Effects of Transitions in Marital Status on Men's Performance of Housework." Journal of Marriage and the Family 61: 700-711.

Christine L. Williams. 1992. "The Glass Escalator: Hidden Advantages for Men in the 'Female' Professions." Social Problems 39: 253-267.

Catherine J. Turco. 2010. "The Cultural Foundations of Tokenism: Evidence from the Leveraged Buyout Industry." American Sociological Review 75: 894-913.

Week 11 (November 16) Structural and Cultural Bases of Networks and Social Support

Mark Granovetter. 1973. "The Strength of Weak Ties." American Journal of Sociology 78: 1360-1380.

Ann Swidler. 1986. "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies." American Sociological Review 51: 273-286.

Margaret Somers. 1994. "The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach." Theory and Society 23, 5: 605-649.

Mark Gould. 1999. "Race and Theory: Culture, Poverty, and Adaptation to Discrimination in Wilson and Ogbu." Sociological Theory 17: 171-200.

Sandra Smith. 2010. Lone Pursuit: Distrust and Defensive Individualism Among the Black Poor, Chapters 2, 3. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Week 12 (November 23) Pre-Thanksgiving holiday (no class)

Week 13 (November 30) Structural and Normative Explanations for Macro-Level Outcomes: The Empirical Puzzle of "Lowest-Low" Fertility

Francesco C. Billari and Hans-Peter Kohler. 2004. "Patterns of Lowest-Low Fertility in Europe." Population Studies 58: 161-176.

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Peter McDonald. 2000. "Gender Equity in Theories of Fertility Transition." Population and Development Review 26: 427-440.

Mary C. Brinton. Grant proposals to NSF and CGP.

Aart C. Liefbroer and Francesco Billari. 2010. "Bringing Norms Back In: A Theoretical and Empirical Discussion of Their Importance for Understanding Demographic Behavior." Population, Space and Place 16: 287-305.

Berna Miller Torr and Susan E. Short. 2004. "Second Births and the Second Shift: A Research Note on Gender Equity and Low Fertility." Population and Development Review 30: 109-130.